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SUBJECT: BENIN NATIONAL DAY: PRESIDENT APOLOGIZES PROMISING TO FIGHT CORRUPTION

REF: (A) COTONOU 310 (B) COTONOU 124; (C) COTONOU 101;
(D) COTONOU 44; (E) 08 COTONOU 802; (F) 08 COTONOU 657;
(G) 08 COTONOU 146

¶1. SUMMARY: In his National Day speech on August 1, 2009, President Yayi explained his measures to strengthen democracy and foster economic progress, including constitutional review, reinforcement of constitution-based institutions, the reorganization of the multi-party system, and the implementation of electoral and administrative reforms (Ref D). Yayi said human resources, economic potential, and infrastructure developments would help mitigate the effect of the global financial crisis on Benin. He pledged to combat corruption by ending impunity. In a subsequent televised interview, the President spoke about the political and economic challenges facing Benin. He blamed former Minister of Finance and Economy, Soule Mana Lawani, for CEN-SAD related corruption, denied any personal involvement, but accepted moral responsibility for it (Ref A). Many felt President Yayi showed humility and willingness to engage in dialogue, while reiterating his commitment to fighting corruption. END SUMMARY.

STRENGHTENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

¶2. On the 49th anniversary of Benin's independence on August 1, President Yayi reiterated his commitment to preserving democratic and economic gains made since Benin embraced democracy in 1990. He added that his government worked towards improving existing and creating new democratic institutions through constitutional review (Ref G). This includes the appointment of members to the High Court of Justice, the Economic and Social Council, and the High Authority for Media and Communication. Yayi also mentioned the recent creation of a Mediator of the Republic, a body charged with resolving conflicts that oppose the administration and citizens. Yayi cited several reforms and objectives, like creating the Computerized Voter Registry (LEPI) (Ref E), restructuring the National Autonomous Electoral Commission (CENA), administrative reform, and implementation of the Opposition Act (Ref C).

¶3. According to the president, the constitution-based multiparty system, as implemented by politicians, disrupts the functioning of democracy. Benin has hundreds of political parties without a political platform. The majority of these parties fail to support democratic governance; very few field candidates in legislative elections and are represented in the National Assembly. Yayi pledged to reform the current multi-party system to allow political parties to play a more efficient role.

TACKLING ECONOMIC CRISIS

¶4. President Yayi emphasized the global financial crisis as a challenge to Benin's economic performance. He underscored the effects of the shrinking global market, the fall in prices of primary products, and the decrease in direct foreign investment and aid. Yayi included that the depreciation of Nigeria's currency (the Naira) caused by a decrease in oil production reduced Nigerian demand for Beninese goods and trans-shipment services. To address these challenges, Yayi proposed that policies focus on the development of human resources, infrastructure, and economic potential (Ref D). He announced the creation of a joint committee focused on mitigating the mid and long-term impact of the financial crisis in Benin. He discussed the need for the GOB to set realistic prices for government supplied commodities like water and electricity, after a failed attempt to contain price inflation through subsidies. The GOB subsequently had to increase water and electricity prices. Yayi stressed efforts to support the private sector and also encouraged public-private relations.

COMBATING CORRUPTION

¶5. President Yayi advocated for good governance, highlighting the importance of transparency and accountability in the management of state funds. He pledged to improve good governance and end impunity. During the press interview, Yayi denounced former Minister of Finance and Economy, Soule Lawani in connection with the CEN-SAD high-profile corruption case (Ref A). Yayi explained that he personally ordered an investigation by the State Audit Office (IGE). He decided to publish the investigation findings, denying allegations that international partners had urged him to do so. Yayi admitted he was surprised and disappointed by Lawani's involvement,

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and confirmed Lawani had failed to conform to public contract regulations. Yayi added that an Independent Investigative Commission has been established to pursue further investigations.

¶6. Because a member of his cabinet was implicated, President Yayi accepted moral responsibility for the CEN-SAD corruption case. However, he denied involvement in any alleged misappropriations of state funds, and confessed the CEN-SAD case shocked and disgraced him. Yayi formally apologized to the Beninese public stating that political haste at times leads to poor decision making.

COMMENT

¶7. President Yayi's interview generally received positive reactions. Politicians feel he showed great humility and frankness. The public hailed him for his open-mindedness and for his political courage as he addressed "thorny" issues. Yayi is the first Beninese president to publicly make frank statements on a high-profile case in which members of his cabinet are allegedly involved. Very few observers believe the president's speech and interview are just electioneering. An analysis of the content of the August 1st speech and interview reveals overall consistency with Yayi's stated political agenda.

BOUSTANI